

# INSIGHTS

On Equity and Outcomes

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## Assessing Racial Campus Climate

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In partnership with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) has had an ongoing commitment toward providing support for Illinois community colleges, with the goal of advancing equitable outcomes for students. In pursuit of this objective, OCCRL researchers have worked with numerous Pathways to Results (PTR) teams statewide, applying the PTR framework to analyze data toward naming a specific equity gap, interrogating associated institutional processes and practices, and implementing change toward closing the identified gap. Regardless of what a PTR team ultimately decides to focus on, conversations on equity inevitably lead to conversations on race. Within such talks, questions often arise about the extent to which institutional leaders understand the racial campus climate. This brief will support practitioners in answering the following questions:

- What is racial campus climate?
- Why would a community college assess racial campus climate?
- What resources could be utilized to assess racial campus climate?



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### **What is racial campus climate?**

As defined by Rankin and Reason (2008), campus climate can be understood “as the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution (p. 264).” Put another way, racial campus climate describes the ways in which racial identity impacts student experiences in a specific campus environment. Harper and Hurtado (2007) have identified three consistent themes in research that was published after Hurtado’s (1992) study on racial campus climate including “1) differential perceptions of campus climate by race, 2) racial/ethnic minority student reports of prejudicial treatment and racist campus environments, and 3) benefits associated with campus climates that facilitate cross-racial engagement (Harper & Hurtado, p. 9).” While these studies largely occurred within the university context, additional research has explored racial campus climate in community colleges (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016; Jones, 2013; Maxwell & Shammas, 2007; Price, Hyle, & Jordan, 2009).

### **Why would a community college assess racial campus climate?**

Racial tensions have come to another historical boiling point following the murder of George Floyd (and numerous other unarmed Black citizens nationwide) by a police officer and in the wake of a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted communities of color. Nationally, hate crimes increased by 17% in 2017; however, college campuses began to experience this trend in 2016 (Bauman, 2018). The groups that were increasingly targeted include those that identify as multiracial, African American, or Jewish (Bauman, 2018). Among the total reported hate crimes on campuses, public community colleges rank third among all institutional types (NCES, 2020). Despite these disturbing trends and the increased calls for racial justice, the Trump administration has directed federal agencies to discontinue trainings on racial sensitivity (Schwartz, 2020).

The state of Illinois is not immune from the impacts of systemic and institutionalized racism. Exclusionary, racist policies and practices have

resulted in highly segregated communities and schools as well as a growing income inequality (Vock, Charles, & Maciag, 2019). Communities in the state that remain overwhelmingly white, with histories of being known as “sundown towns,” made national headlines recently for Black Lives Matter protests that were met with both support and racist resistance (Jaffe, 2020; Munoz & Rosenberg, 2020). Given that community colleges serve individual local districts, this racialized history and segregation impact the environments in which students live and learn. Simply taking a drive through any area of the state or attending a high school athletic event allows one to witness this segregation of schools, neighborhoods, and towns. If a community college is sincerely committed to closing racial equity gaps in educational and economic outcomes, it is critical to understand the racial campus climate. Upon identifying an equity gap, ICCB and ISBE (2020) have called on institutions to engage in further research “to contextualize and clarify the root causes to be targeted for intervention” (p. 96). In the final analysis, why wouldn’t a community college want to understand the racialized impact of institutional policies and practices that contribute to racial equity gaps?

### **What resources could be utilized to assess racial campus climate?**

A common barrier to conducting a racial campus climate assessment is the absence of human and financial resources. This arguably reflects a lack of commitment at the leadership level to invest in acknowledging and further understanding the impact of systemic racism in context. The importance of assessing racial campus climate is only exemplified when conversations arise among white institutional leaders who are willing to acknowledge the disconnect between the demographics of faculty, administrators, staff, and students.

A lack of racially diverse faculty, staff, and administration is not a reason to avoid engaging students in conversations about racial campus climate. If anything, it is a further reason to assess racial campus climate and provides an opportunity to question recruitment and hiring practices. Nor should institutional leaders rely on or expect that a small number of racially minoritized employees will conduct any and all racial campus climate assessments. Abrica (2019) advocates for the practices

of researcher reflexivity and positionality within the context of conducting qualitative research with community college students, particularly when the researcher does not share the same social identities as the participants.

A case study of Capital University that involved a pilot study of racial campus climate could be helpful to institutions perceiving themselves as lacking resources (Lynner et al., 2020). Given its limited resources, Capital University opted to conduct a pilot study led by the director of assessment and curricular development alongside two graduate students (Lynner et al., 2020). The below questions can help facilitate discussions on identifying existing or potential resources toward facilitating a racial campus climate assessment:

- Who on our campus is trained in quantitative methodologies?
- Who on our campus is trained in qualitative methodologies?
- Who on our campus has expertise in critical theoretical frameworks?
- If we can’t identify anyone with expertise in methodologies or theoretical frameworks, what training could we provide to current employees?
- How might we partner with graduate programs or community organizations in our area that offer this expertise or would be interested in the results of this assessment?
- What external funding opportunities are available to apply to for financial support toward conducting a racial campus climate assessment?
- What data do we already collect on student satisfaction that could be disaggregated by race?
- What data do we already collect on student outcomes and what are the trends by student racial group?
- What technology do we already have that could be utilized in a survey?
- What student groups might we engage with to understand the racialized experiences of students on our campus? Are these groups representative of the students experiencing inequitable outcomes at our institution?

It is critically important that any efforts to assess racial campus climate are conducted by those who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to do so in a way that does not further marginalize students and employees of color. In addition, it must be understood that the intent is to interrogate the institutional environment and not to place blame on individual groups or to deny their lived experiences on the campus and in the community. As Hurtado (1992) suggests regarding the understanding of a campus's racial climate,

“These efforts should be guided by a willingness to question our assumptions, consideration of the experiences of different ethnic groups, and an overriding concern for a quality of life on campus that will be conducive to student development (p. 564).”

### **Conclusion and Resources**

In conclusion, conducting a campus racial climate assessment is ultimately ineffective if it does not inform overall efforts toward institutional improvement. Illinois Central College, located in East Peoria, Illinois, applied for and received support from the Lumina Foundation's Fund for Racial Justice and Equity to further understand the racialized experiences of students in its district (Illinois Central College, 2018). In partnership with Peoria Public Schools, the funding supported a summit that highlighted barriers for African American students and identified action steps to systemically alleviate them (McHugh, 2019). This is an example of naming a specific racial equity gap and involving relevant stakeholders who can move the topic from discussion to action, in an effort to take institutional and systemic responsibility for closing the longtime gap in educational outcomes.

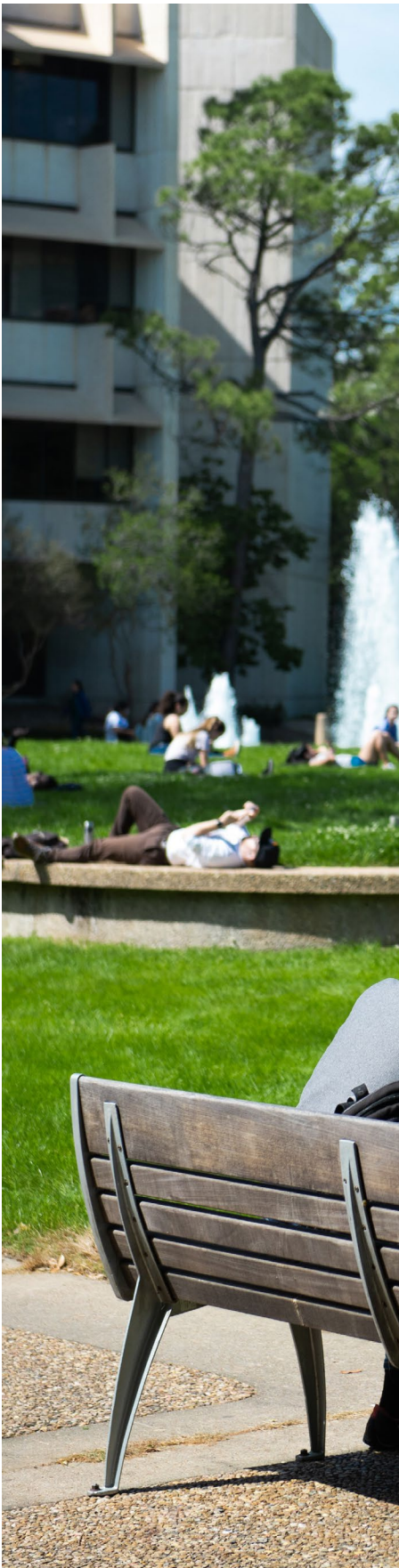




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These resources from OCCRL will be helpful to community colleges as they take inventory of available resources and opportunities to explore the campus racial climate:

### **Listen**

Community College for All (CC-ALL) [\*Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education\*](#) podcast series at (podcasts are located toward the bottom of the page)

[\*Democracy's College podcast series\*](#)

### **Read**

[\*Creating a Space for Student Voice in Advancing Program Review\*](#) by Dr. Chauntee Thrill

[\*Community Colleges, the Racialized Climate, and Engaging Diverse Views Through Intergroup Dialogue\*](#) by Drs. Chaddrick James-Gallaway & Dr. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher

[\*Identifying and Responding to Racial Microaggressions\*](#) by Drs. Chaddrick James-Gallaway & Francena Turner

### **Watch**

[\*Advancing Racial Justice and Equitable Outcomes in Community Colleges Institutes\*](#) keynote presentations and Equity Eye-Opener webinar series

Community Colleges for All (CC-ALL) [\*Exploring and Engaging Equity\*](#) video vignette series

[\*Micro What? Microaggressions and the Impact on Faculty, staff, and Students\*](#) webinar presented by Dr. Chaddrick James-Gallaway

[\*Pillars of Neutrality? On Subjectivities of Institutional Research and Researchers\*](#) webinar presented by Dr. Elvira J. Abrica

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